World History Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**The Spread of Islam in History**

***Annotate this article, please. After reading AND ANNOTATING (it’s worth 20%), please answer the questions on the last page. THIS SHOULD BE COMPLETED BY NEXT CLASS!***

**A Slow Process.**Hearing that Muslims conquered territory "from the Atlantic to the borders of China," many peoplereading about Muslim history often wrongly imagine that this huge region instantly became "Islamic." The rapid conquests led to the idea that Islam spread by the sword, with people forced to become Muslims. In fact, the spread of Islam in these vast territories took centuries, and Muslims made up a small minority of the population for a long time. In other words, the expansion of territory under Muslim rule happened very rapidly, but the spread of Islam in those lands was a much slower process. The paragraphs below explain how and when that happened.

**"Let there be no compulsion in religion."**The Qur’an specifies, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2: 256). This verse states that no person can ever be forced to accept religion against their will. It tells Muslims never to force people to convert to Islam. Anyone who accepts Islam under pressure might not be sincere, and conversion in name only is useless to them, and harmful to members of the faith community.

Prophet Muhammad set a precedent as the leader of Medina. Under his leadership, the Muslims practiced tolerance towards those of other religions. Muslims made treaties and agreements with people of other religions. They discussed religious ideas with Jews, Christians and polytheists (believers in many gods). The Qur’an and Muhammad’s example required Muslim leaders to be tolerant of the People of the Book, or Jews and Christians, and to allow them freedom of worship. With few exceptions, Muslim leaders have followed these policies over time.

**Becoming Muslim.**To accept Islam, a person only has to make the profession of faith (shahada) in front of two or more witnesses. Even after a person has accepted Islam, he or she may take a long time to learn and apply its practices, going through many different stages or levels of understanding and practice over time. As Islam spread among large populations, this process was multiplied across a whole population. Different individuals and social classes may have different understandings of Islam at the same time. Also, many local variations and pre-Islamic customs remained, even after societies had been majority Muslim for a long time. This has been a source of diversity among Muslim cultures and regions.

**The Process of Conversion.**The Prophet Muhammad preached Islam at Mecca and Medina in Arabia for about twenty-three years. For the first ten years (612 to 622 CE), he preached publicly at Medina. After the migration to Medina he preached only in his own house—which was the first masjid (place of prayer, or *mosque*)—only to people who came to hear him. Preaching in houses or in the masjid became the pattern in Islam.

After Muhammad’s death, the *ummah* (Muslim community) was led by leaders called *caliphs.* The first two leaders (or “caliphs”) of the Islamic Empire required most of the inhabitants of Arabia who had been pagans to affirm their loyalty as Muslims. Christian and Jewish communities were allowed to continue practicing their faiths. Outside Arabia, however, the caliph (Muslim leader) did not force non-Arabs to become Muslims. Historians are surprised that they did not even encourage them to become Muslims. Only Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (ruled 717–720) made an effort to encourage people to accept Islam, and sent out missionaries to North Africa and other areas.

During the early caliphate (632–750), non-Arabs began to accept Islam of their own free will. New Muslims migrated to Muslim garrison cities, to learn about Islam and possibly to get jobs and associate themselves with ruling groups. Whatever their reasons their actions became more common over the years, and expanded the Muslim population. These migrants became associates, or *mawali*, of Arab tribes. The *mawali*also tried to convince their relatives and members of their ethnic group to become Muslims. Some migrant Arab and*mawali* familiesmade important contributions in preserving and spreading Islamic knowledge. They became scholars of Islamic law, history, literature and the sciences. In this way, Islam spread in spite of political rulers, not because of them.

From 661-750 CE, Muslims were united under the Umayyad Dynasty. During the years of the Umayyad caliphs from 661–750 CE, the overwhelming majority of non-Arab population of the Umayyad—which stretched from Morocco to China—were not Muslims. Toward the end of that time, the North African Berbers became the first major non-Arab group to accept Islam.

**Developing a Muslim culture.**In Egypt, Iran and Iraq, scholars believe that Islam reached approximately 50 percent of the population by the 900s, three hundred years after its arrival. From then on, conversion rates slowly increased in the region.

Islam also spread to Spain and Portugal between 711 and about 1250. After the Reconquista by Spanish Catholics was completed in 1492, and many Muslims and Jews were expelled from Spain, Islam continued to exist until after 1600. Islam may never have been the majority faith during the 700 years of Muslim rule. Spain, Portugal and Sicily are the only places where which Islam has ever been driven out.

**Continuing Spread.**Beginning in 1192, other Muslim Turkish tribesmen conquered parts of India, including the area of present-day Bangladesh. The number of Muslims there gradually increased in India from that time. The people of Bangladesh were Buddhists, and, beginning about 1300, they rapidly embraced Islam, becoming a Muslim majority in that region. Elsewhere in India, Hinduism remained the religion of the majority.

In South India and Sri Lanka, traders and Sufis, or mystical followers of Islam, spread Islam and carried it to Southeast Asia by 1300 CE. Over the next two centuries in today’s Indonesia—the Spice Islands—Islam spread. Entering a land where Buddhism, Hinduism and traditional faiths of the island people existed, it took several centuries before practice of Islam became established as it was practiced in other Muslim lands. In Central Asia, Islam gradually spread to the original homelands of the Turks and Mongols, until it was the main religion of nearly all Turkic-speaking peoples. Islam spread into Xinjiang, the western part of China, where it was tolerated by the Chinese empire. Much earlier, in the 8th and 9th centuries, a group of ethnic Chinese Han had accepted Islam. These groups continue to practice Islam today.

**Africa.**Before 1500, Islam had already spread widely in sub-Saharan Africa. The first town south of the Sahara that became majority Muslim was Gao on the Niger River in Mali. After the Soninke of the Kingdom of Ghana became Muslims around 1076, Islam spread along the Niger River. Muslims established the kingdom of Mali in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, which was later taken over by the Songhai from 1465 to 1600. In the thriving capital city of Mali, Timbuktu, African Muslim scholars taught, wrote and practiced Islamic law as judges. Often, rulers in these places accepted it first, followed by others.

In East Africa, Arab traders had spread Islam down the coast by the tenth century. In the Sudan, during the fourteenth century, Islam spread through migration of Muslim Arab tribesmen.

**Strong Governments and the Spread of Islam.**In summary, the expansion of Muslim rule was different from the spread of Islam among populations. It spread mainly among people in the cities and countryside, and not by the efforts of governments. Ironically, Islam has spread most widely and rapidly among the population at times when Muslim rule was weaker and less unified. When Muslim political regimes were weak, decentralized, disunited, or completely absent, Islam as a religion flourished and often spread to non-Muslims. For example, traders, Sufis and the influence of Muslim culture in cities aided the spread of Islam to new areas that were not ruled by Muslims.

On the other hand, strong states like the Ottoman Empire, had little success in spreading Islam, even though their territory grew. In some places, a ruler’s conversion often influenced people in the society to accept Islam. These conversions, however, were not the result of conquests. Merchants, teachers, and traveling Sufi preachers were the agents who helped spread Islam. Finally, according to Islamic beliefs, it is not a Muslim who causes someone to accept Islam, but God who opens a person’s heart to faith.

1. How was the spread of Muslim territory different from the spread of the Islamic faith?
2. The Quran says “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” What does this mean, and what does this imply for Muslim leaders?
3. What does the term “People of the Book” mean? How did Muslim leaders treat them?
4. Summarize how a person becomes Muslim.
5. How and where did Muhammad preach?
6. What is a “caliph”?
7. Who were the *mawali*? How did they help spread Islam?
8. Why was it significant that the Berbers accepted Islam? (think outside the box here!)
9. As you read about the various places Islam spread, keep a running list hereof the places/countries it spread to (you should have at least 13 places/countries listed!):
10. According to the last section, what were the most important factors that helped spread Islam?